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SUBJECT: VISIT TO SHAN CAMP HIGHLIGHTS US CONCERN

REF: 05 CHIANG MAI 245

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Despite the last-minute refusal by Thai government authorities to allow entry into an informal Shan refugee camp in northern Chiang Mai province, Ambassador Boyce's March 21 visit to the area succeeded in highlighting U.S. concern about the group. By traveling to the Thai-Burma border area near the camp and meeting with Thai officials and Shan groups, the Ambassador encouraged both sides to explore solutions that would respect Royal Thai Government decisions, protect the safety of the refugees, and allow greater access to aid organizations offering humanitarian assistance. The Ambassador later underscored U.S. interest in the Shan situation by briefing National Security Council chief Gen. Winai on his trip. End summary

¶2. (SBU) RTG sensitivities toward the status of ethnic Shan refugees in Thailand came to the fore March 21 when Ambassador Boyce attempted to visit a group of some 600 refugees based at an informal camp in Wiang Haeng, Chiang Mai province. Thirty minutes before setting out for the camp, the Ambassador was told by Chiang Mai Governor Suwat Tantipat that the trip was "not appropriate." Suwat said he worried that the visit would strain Thai-Burmese relations and give prominence to the Shan that the Thai government did not want. At the same time, Suwat acknowledged the importance of acting in accord with humanitarian principles and noted that the RTG turns a blind eye toward the assistance provided the Shan by NGOs.

¶3. (SBU) After assuring Gov. Suwat that he did not intend the visit to be a media event, the Ambassador requested and received permission to travel to an RTA border outpost located 1.5 kilometers from Goong Jor and meet with Swan Women's Action Network (SWAN) member Charm Tong, who had discussed Burmese issues with President Bush at the White House last October, and other Shan representatives. Col. Suthad Charumanee, an ethnic Shan and RTA 7th Infantry Regiment commander, accompanied the delegation along with several members of his staff to the border post.

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Thai Concerns About the Shan  
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¶4. (SBU) The 600 Shan have been living in the makeshift Goong Jor camp since 2002, after fighting between the Burmese State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) drove the residents of four small villages across the border into Thailand (reftel). The RTG has not given official refugee status to the Shan because of what Thai officials call the close ethnic, linguistic and cultural relationship between the Thai and Shan peoples. With these

close ties, RTG officials say, Shan can easily assimilate into Thai society and refugee camps could be used to perpetuate armed conflict inside Burma. The Thai also worry about the pull factor and say the Shan in practice are allowed to enter Thailand when fleeing fighting. Without official refugee status, Shan leaders fear their populations are more vulnerable to labor exploitation and political mistreatment, while international aid organizations face more barriers to distributing food and medical assistance. While there are no precise statistics on the Shan in Thailand, the number is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands. Some have lived in Thailand for many years, though others are more recent arrivals who have fled fighting or persecution in Burma.

15. (SBU) Col. Suthad and Gov. Suwat assured the Ambassador that the RTG would not forcefully move the 600 Shan away from their current location. Instead, the Thais are proposing the Shan voluntarily move to a less accessible location a few kilometers away, called Doi Dam, which the RTG claimed was a safer location with more fertile soil. This area is across the border from SSA-S occupied territory in Burma; the Thais hope that the Shan will eventually cross back into Burma to the SSA-S controlled area. In the event of an SPDC attack, the RTG would provide refuge at the Doi Dam location, allowing the Shan quick movement across the border as needed. Col. Suthad said he understood the refugees' concerns but that their leaders had refused to fully listen to the RTG's proposals.

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Shan Concerns About Thai Proposals  
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16. (SBU) Later, in a separate meeting near Goong Jor, SWAN members and refugee representatives told Ambassador Boyce that the Thai proposals were less than ideal and did not address their educational and health needs. From their current location, refugee children are able to attend Thai government schools in two nearby towns; it would be more difficult to do so from the remote Doi Dam area and educational opportunities inside Burma are nearly non-existent. RTG officials responded

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that children could be allowed to board at their current schools but that such details had yet to be worked out. Both sides also disagreed over the quality of access roads to Doi Dam during the rainy season.

17. (SBU) Refugee representatives said they see a return to Burma, even to SSA-S-controlled areas, as too dangerous and have no desire to give the appearance that they have aligned themselves with Shan rebel forces. Although there has been no recent major violence between SSA-S and SPDC forces, Shan leaders said the risk of landmines or attacks from the SPDC and United Wa State Army was still too high to return to their homeland. Shan leaders said they were unlikely to accept offers to relocate.

18. (SBU) A handful of NGOs, some of which also work in the nine ethnic Karen and Karenni refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, are currently supplying Goong Jor with basic foodstuffs and medical supplies. The Ambassador told the Shan that the USG would look into getting NGOs better access to the group and possibly dedicating some USAID funds for the refugees through Shan community-based organizations. USAID's U.S. NGO partners have begun discussions with these groups regarding possible assistance to strengthen access to health and education services and anticipate beginning to award sub-grants and providing targeted technical support as early as May 2006. The Ambassador encouraged the Shan to listen to the RTG proposals and consider them carefully and added that he would convey their concerns about access to humanitarian aid to the Thai government and other interested parties. The Ambassador stressed, however, that any move of the Goong Jor group would have to be voluntary.

19. (SBU) To underline U.S. interest in the Shan situation, on March 24 the Ambassador briefed NSC chief Gen. Winai Phattiyakul on the trip. Ambassador said the current situation seemed

satisfactory and emphasized that anything the RTG asks the Goong Jor group to do should be voluntary. Winai commented that the Ambassador was the first envoy from any country to visit the Goong Jor area.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The Chiang Mai Provincial Office confirmed that the last-minute decision to stop the Ambassador from visiting Goong Jor was made by Gov. Suwat, after informal consultation with colleagues at the Ministry of Interior. The MOI, which drives policy on refugees, prefers to keep the Shan issue low-profile and Gov. Suwat reportedly wanted to avoid any publicity that might damage the Thaksin government in the lead-up to the election. The high level of attention the USG decided to give to the Shan refugees struck a particularly sensitive nerve in this context. While the Thai military's proposed temporary solutions are not ideal for the Shan, the Ambassador's demonstration of USG interest should help prevent any drastic actions that will affect this group and open the door for greater access for humanitarian aid. Shan leaders expressed their appreciation for the Ambassador's trip, which they regarded as extremely helpful.

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